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THE REGRE A DEFECTOR

By William Beecher

Washington, D.C.
Nicolae Horodincea is a spy who came in from the cold. Now, more than a year after he defected to the United States, he thinks it may have been a mistake.

Discouraged, disillusioned, and humiliated by his treatment at the hands of the American intelligence community, abandoned by his wife and child, Horodincea says he is thinking of going back home to Romania even though he faces a possible twenty-year prison term for treason.

That he would even consider such a bleak option suggests that deep-seated problems may exist in the way spies who pass through the looking glass are treated in this country.

More important, Horodincea's unhappiness raises troubling questions about whether his complaints about the US intelligence community will scare off other would-be defectors.

It is difficult to check out Horodincea's complaints. Although another Romanian defector, Nicola Traian, insists they reflect quite similar experiences on his part, the Central Intelligence Agency has maintained a stony silence on the charges. The CIA man whom the two identified as being in charge of the "resettlement" of defectors declined to discuss Horodincea's assertions and referred all questions to the CIA's public information office, which has refused any comment.

In fairness to the CIA, it should be pointed out that part of the problem may be that East European intelligence officers lead privileged lives in their societies and doubtless have inflated expectations of how they will be treated if they come over to rich old Uncle Sam.

But even assuming some exaggeration on Horodincea's part, there appears to be an insensitivity in dealing with human beings who are experiencing trauma over their treason and attempted assimilation into a totally different culture.

This is Horodincea's story.

A bear of a man in his mid-30s, with a laughing round face and an ingratiating manner, Horodincea worked as third secretary in the Romanian Embassy. One of his responsibilities was to deal with American newsmen, answering questions about the actions or attitudes of his government and attempting to pick up low-grade political intelligence on the attitudes of the US government.

But his larger responsibility, by his own account, was to make friends among key congressional aides on Capitol Hill. Romania is one of the few Eastern bloc nations to get Most Favored Nation tariff treatment, renewable on an annual basis, and maintaining good relations on the Hill is of overriding importance.

Horodincea insists he never violated American law, he never sought to buy secret documents or compromise anyone in that role.

He is a bit shy about discussing all his reasons for defecting. But both he and Traian, a fellow intelligence officer, say a major reason was a shakeup in the security hierarchy back home that made life in the field intolerable. Both say they were not recruited as defectors by American intelligence; they came over on their own.

In Horodincea's case, he was driving with his wife and young son on the night of February 23, 1980, when he suddenly pulled his car into Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and befuddled army officers with his request for political asylum.

Several FBI and CIA men were called in, he says, and talked to him through the night, from 11 p.m. to 9 a.m. After they apparently decided that he was a bona fide defector, he and his family were taken to a posh hotel in downtown Washington.

"They held me in custody for three days in different hotels," he recalls. "They said, 'You did a good decision to defect. You'll have a marvelous life here. Especially your son. We will take care of you.'"

They were then moved to a so-called safe house in the suburbs of northern Virginia, a residence rented by a law firm as a cover for the CIA, the actual lessor.

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